

# HOW WAR DEFINES US. A LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*No one likes war. No one likes the atrocities happening during a war and their consequences and the traumas they leave behind. However, war was always part of our world, bringing us where we are now and giving us the borders we now enjoy. As wars have been part of the world's societies for so long, they define how we think, see the world, and speak. This paper aims to show how words and expressions, so metaphors, belonging to the military field, normally used in a war zone or for war-related contexts, are now being used in situations that have nothing to do with conflicts and employ different meanings than the ones they originally had. The research will be focused on a corpus composed of headlines from Romanian online news websites to show how a changing media system pushes journalists to rely on exaggerated headlines to keep their readers close. The consequence of using war metaphors in stories about politics is, however, the trivialization of real war information.*

**Key words:** war, linguistics, expressions, words, metaphors, pragmatics, military, online media.

**JEL Classification:** Z10.

## 1. Introduction

Wars are terrible. No one can argue that. However, wars have always been part of our world, even if we talk about conventional or cold wars. They have changed, many times, the course of human history, opening new doors and closing others. Wars are something people try to avoid, but they also have something that is mysterious, interesting and sometimes attractive for others, due to their inaccessibility, hence the interest they get from movie directors, writers and artists, in general.

After 2000, wars have gotten even more attention, as the media system (online, TV and printed press) extended rapidly across various continents, sent reporters to the countries affected by wars and so people got access to such information quicker. This huge amount of information has therefore influenced the way people think and discuss wars but also how they speak in day-to-day life. The military terms used in media reporting or even in movies about wars and conflicts started to be more and more used in fields and contexts that often have nothing to do with a battlefield. Studying and talking about wars has also often been seen as approving or promoting it, a misconception that led to this field getting the attention of military or security experts only. It is however interesting to see how these military terms have started to become the 'favorite'

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words of Romanian journalists when writing about politics, most of the times, but also about other fields that have no direct connection to wars. The Romanian language has expressions and metaphors that use such terms, but other languages, like English, for example, have them as well (eg. 'fighting for something', when talking about a hard work towards a goal, a 'battle' used instead of 'competition', 'victory' or 'defeat' for winning or losing a competition etc.). What is interesting, however, is how much these terms are nowadays being used in the media (online media) to present information about politics. Even though such examples exist in other languages as well, they seem to be not as present as they are in Romanian. Can such a tendency leave no marks on how we, the readers, perceive war?

## **2. Methodology**

The media (including the TV and online media) is a great way of observing a language as it mirrors how people speak and how the language evolves in a certain society. Therefore, the corpus I will be using for this study will be composed of online news articles, mostly headlines, that present information about politics or diplomacy. After presenting the headlines, an analysis of the expressions will be presented. Each of the headlines has been translated into English for a better understanding. In some cases, the almost literal translation was preferred, for the reader to identify the metaphor correctly.

## **3. Literature review**

Due to its geopolitical location and its changing borders, Romania has been involved in several wars throughout its history. The most significant ones have started during the Ottoman Empire, in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the old states of Romania (Transylvania, Moldavia or Wallachia) have been involved in wars with the Turkish forces, either as enemies or as allies. Then, it was also involved in the war between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, in the World War I and World War II and, even it did not exactly engage with anyone during the Cold War, it was aligned to the geopolitical interests of the Soviet Union. These things, which often ended with temporary occupation of the nowadays Romanian territory, have influenced the Romanian language by adding new words to the vocabulary. The wars themselves, however, have also left some other footprints in the language, because they led to war-related expressions or metaphors that are even today used in everyday life. Some examples to that end are:

- a. Declanșarea ofensivei împotriva a ceva – Launching an offensive against something;
- b. A lansa un atac fulgerător – To launch a blitzkrieg attack;
- c. În tranșeele vieții – In the trenches of life;
- d. Artileria grea a argumentelor – The heavy artillery of arguments;

- e. Bombardament mediatic/ informațional – Media/information bombardment;
- f. Plan de luptă bine structurat – Well-structured battle plan;
- g. A mobiliza oamenii pentru o cauză – To mobilize the people for a cause;
- h. Înarmat cu răbdare – Armed with patience;
- i. Sub asediul presiunilor sociale – Under siege from social pressures;
- î. În bătaia tunurilor – In the line of fire;
- j. Ținta principală a criticilor – The main target of criticism;
- k. Războiul declarațiilor – The war of declarations;
- l. A trece la contraofensivă – To launch a counteroffensive;
- m. A lua o poziție defensivă – To take a defensive position;
- n. Tactici de gherilă în afaceri – Guerrilla tactics in business;
- o. Zona minată a negocierilor – The minefield of negotiations;
- p. A ridica un zid de apărare – To build a wall of defense;
- q. Batalionul ideilor inovatoare – The battalion of innovative ideas;
- r. Arme secrete în negocieri – Secret weapons in negotiation;
- s. Războinic al dreptății – Warrior of justice;
- ș. A lupta pentru dragoste – to fight for love etc.

These are just some examples collected from Google, but many others are used in daily conversations by Romanians as well. All these expressions, however, represent metaphors of war and have the purpose of exaggerating events, contexts, situations or the characteristics of people.

### **3.1. Metaphor**

The studies of metaphor see as a turning point the research of Johnson and Lakoff on the conceptual metaphor in 1980, which then was developed into the contemporary theory of metaphor, in 1993. Since those two moments, many other theories evolved, either continuing what Johnson and Lakoff have started or just contradicting what they postulated. In their first study, Lakoff and Johnson argue that the metaphor is the use of different concepts to talk about or describe certain things, thus it is not only a language tool, but also a cognitive one, because it involves the „mapping” of concepts from one source domain to a target domain (Lakoff. 1993). For example, in a metaphor such as „love is a battle” (ro. Dragostea este o luptă) the military term „battle”, used on a battlefield when referring to two opposing armed forces, is used to describe love as a struggle with emotions or referring to the ups and downs of the feeling itself. This conceptual metaphor, however, can be subcategorized into three types, according to their functions: structural, ontological and orientational (Kovecses, 2002, apud...). According to Kovecses, structural metaphors help people understand the target concepts through mapping and the example she gives is ‘TIME IS MOTION’, which helps people understand that the passing of time is

motion. Conventional metaphors, on the other hand, are the metaphors used by people every day, for different purposes, like 'go on separate ways' to talk about ending a relationship. These metaphors are conventionalized, and people don't even realize they are using them as metaphors (Kovecses, 2002).

The metaphors people use day by day and refer to terms from the military/war field have been previously studied by Sun Ling (2010), in relation to the English language. She concentrated her study on five areas (politics, business, sport, disease and love) and used as corpus sentences collected either from Google, or from the British National Corpus. War metaphors have also been studied by Flusberg, Matlock and Thibodeau (2018), who argue that there are two reasons behind using them in public discourse: "they draw on basic and widely shared schematic knowledge that efficiently structures our ability to reason and communicate about many different types of situations, and they reliably express an urgent, negatively valenced emotional tone that captures attention and motivates action" (2018: 1). Previous similar studies (Cespedes, 2014; Huckins, 2016; or Wiggins, 2012) suggest that their common use in public discourse affect the way people perceive both wars and the fields they are used for. Huckins, for example, who studies war metaphors in the marketing field, says that using such terms and expressions reflects Americans' need to connect to the war experience, even if they did not, physically:

"This reflects the cultural, perhaps even psychological, need of many Americans to connect somehow to the war experience even though nobody is asking them to, the least of whom our veterans. If you talk to veterans, they reflect many opinions and backgrounds, including their motivation to serve in the first place and what they think of their war experiences. Most don't want extravagant ceremonies or constant free cups of coffee or meals; most simply want military service to be acknowledged and supported (not just theirs but everyone's) by our population and more importantly, the chance to start a new, post-military life knowing their service mattered. Seems fair enough. American culture loves its wars and those who fight them, but not in the way that matters most." (Huckins, 2016)

Lakoff, in a 1990 piece about the use of metaphors to talk about the Gulf War went as further as to saying that "metaphors can kill", referring to the damaging a metaphor such as one used in the foreign policy of the USA at that time, "a nation is a state" can do:

"It is used hundreds of times a day, every time the nation of Iraq is conceptualized in terms of a single person, Saddam Hussein. The war, we are told, is not being waged against the Iraqi people, but only against this one person. Ordinary American citizens are using this metaphor when they say things like, "Saddam is a tyrant. He must be stopped." What the metaphor hides, of course, is that the 3000 bombs to be dropped in the first

two days will not be dropped on that one person. They will kill many thousands of the people hidden by the metaphor, people that according to the metaphor we are not going to war against. (Lakoff, 1990/republished 2012, apud Lakoff, 2003:

### ***3.2 War metaphors in the media***

In the media discourse, as well, it seems that war metaphors are highly used globally and a study found in Karlberg and Buell, 2005, shows that 17% of the articles published in Time and 15% of the articles in Newsweek between 1981 and 2000 used at least 1 war metaphor. Nowadays, however, it seems that these figures have risen.

In the Romanian online news, journalists often appeal to metaphors to describe events or people. This helps them get the attention of the readers and, sometimes, imply certain personal thoughts about some matters that they cannot otherwise express due to the impartiality a journalist must show. As a journalist myself I often find it hard not to use metaphors, as the implications of some events could be better explained using them. I still contain myself. Why? As I have seen, over the years, how the use of war metaphors, especially when talking about politics, tends to exaggerate some actions or behaviors or to be used just as “clickbait” for readers to enter some news websites to then find out the article has no essence.

In the last almost three years, however, the use of war metaphors has increased, especially due to the war on our borders, initiated by Russia, who illegally invaded Ukraine, in February 2022. Unfortunately, the last years have witnessed other conflicts as well, globally, which have influenced the way journalists – who now do not write about one field only, but about all fields – describe politics or lifestyle events. It is hard to “let go” of some expressions and specific terms when one is writing about a war and then has to write another article about domestic politics. In a previous study, I have analyzed how metaphors were highly used by Romanian journalists to discuss about the war in Gaza, which started in October 2023, and to express the suffering of the people often comparing it to hell (Soare, 2023). When it comes to politics, technology or even lifestyle, the use of war metaphors is even more obvious as it connects fields which are merely or totally separated. In the following paragraphs, we will look at the war metaphors used in the headlines of Romanian online news publications referring to politics (wherein they touch different aspects).

## **4. Corpus analysis**

According to the principles of wars, there are different elements that constitute a battle between two or more parties. First, we have the armed forces of each side involved in a war, composed of soldiers and their military equipment.

To go to war, they need strategies and tactics, established by commanders. The troops are split into units, brigades, battalions etc., go on missions and they either win or lose. The same perspective seems to be in the minds of journalists when describing politics, such as Ling puts it:

*Source:* WAR *Target:* POLITICS

- (a) armies in a war - parties in a political campaign
- (b) soldiers in a war - politicians in a certain political campaign
- (c) battles in a war - election in a political campaign
- (d) victory in a war - success in a political campaign
- (e) defeat in a war - failure in a political campaign
- (f) war strategies - political tactics or strategies (Ling, 2010: 11)

Even though the scheme provided above regards the context of a political campaign, that can be applied all the time in the Romanian politics, but, indeed, even more during elections time. In Romanian news, diplomatic issues are, as well, regarded through the perspective of a war, hence the ‘armies in a war’ could either be the political parties (fighting through statements) or different states arguing through official statements.

#### 4.1. War is a statement

One of the most used metaphors in the Romanian news articles is that of the statements of different politicians as being considered a war. The mapping of the two fields (discourse and war) suggests not only the consequences of the statements, but, most of the time, also the absurdity or nonsense of what is said, such as in a war scenario wherein the two conflict sides fight but none conquers anything.

- (1) **The war of statements** began again. / *Ro: A reînceput războiul declarațiilor.* (cotidianul.ro)
- (2) **The war of statements:** Russia accuses an Israeli minister of “anti-historical statements”. / *Ro: Războiul declarațiilor: Rusia acuză un ministrul israelian de "declarații antiistorice."* (ziarulfinanciar.ro)
- (3) **War of statements** between Hungary and the USA: Budapest launches serious accusations after Joe Biden talked about Viktor Orban’s dictatorship. / *Ro: Război al declarațiilor între Ungaria și SUA: Budapesta lansează acuzații grave după ce Joe Biden a vorbit despre „dictatura” lui Viktor Orban.* (hotnews.ro)

As one can notice, the diplomatic tensions between officials or countries are being described as a war due to the misunderstandings between the two sides. In (1), the headline is constructed just as the announcement of the beginning of a war, meanwhile in (3) the metaphor of the statement is accompanied by another one, the metaphor of an accusation being “launched” towards someone else, just like a missile or a bomb. The latter is also frequently present in the

Romanian online news articles, as it underlines the seriousness of the accusations and its effects on the other side, just like an attack has consequences on its target. The use of these metaphors in newspapers and online media aims at drawing attention to the information being presented, in a way that breaches the objectiveness the author of the article should have, because the statements are being filtered and considered by the journalist serious or important enough to compare them to a war.

#### 4.2. *Information is a bomb*

- (4) Putin was **bombarded** with critics during his annual questions and answers session. / *Ro: Putin a fost BOMBARDAT cu mesaje critice în timpul sesiunii anuale de întrebări și răspunsuri.* (Romaniatv.ro)
- (5) The online space, **bombarded** by Russia with fake news. / *Ro: Mediul online, bombardat de Rusia cu fake news.* (presamil.ro)
- (6) The **bomb-document**: The plan for Klaus Iohannis's dismissal! How can he be overthrown from Cotroceni. / *Ro: DOCUMENT-BOMBĂ: Planul pentru suspendarea lui Klaus Iohannis! Cum poate fi înlăturat de la Cotroceni.* (Realitateatv.net)
- (7) Tic-tac in justice. Three **time bombs** are about to explode at CCR and CSM. / *Ro: Tic-tac în justiție. Trei bombe cu ceas stau să explodeze la CCR și CSM.* jurnalul.ro
- (8) Attention to the **time bombs** from the law on financing the parties. / *Ro: Atentie la bomba cu ceas din legea finantarii partidelor.* (hotnews.ro)
- (9) The law on pensions passes the government along with a **time bomb**. Marcel Bolos asks the coalition to take responsibility on the budget impact: an additional cost of 55 billion Ron per year. / *Ro: Legea pensiilor trece prin guvern cu tot cu o "bombă cu ceas". Marcel Boloș cere coaliției să își asume efectele bugetare: cost suplimentar de 55 mld. pe an.* (cursdeguvernare.ro)

In examples (4) and (5), both the critics and the fake news spread on social media are being compared to bomb attacks, due to the intensity and the volume of the information. First, in (4) President Vladimir Putin receives too many and harsh critics from Russian citizens and journalists and, in (5), the quantity of false information in the online space is being regarded as an attack with bombs by a state-actor. There is another tendency in the Romanian online news (plus newspapers and TV) to present documents or important information as "bombs" (6) due to the consequences and the impact of that information being released to the public (as considered by the journalist).

In (7), (8) and (9), the laws and provisions in the Romanian Government are seen as time bombs due to the reactions these are about to provoke either

from politicians or from the citizens. The process here is an action starting an irreversible consequence and implies also certain pressure and tension provoked by the documents themselves.

#### 4.3. *Parties/ political leaders are soldiers*

- (10) The left european parties create a **common frontline** against the extreme-right. / Ro: *Partidele de stânga europene fac front comun împotriva extremei-drepte.* (moldova.europalibera)
- (11) **Common frontline** against the prosecutors and handcuffs. How are Basescu, Udre, Tariceanu, Ponta and other SDP leaders in NAa firing the same artillery. / Ro: *Front comun împotriva procurorilor si catuselor. Cum trag Basescu, Udrea, Tariceanu, Ponta si alti lideri PSD in DNA cu aceleasi cartuse.* (hotnews.ro)

The alliances some political leaders or parties have or create ad-hoc to respond to certain situations are seen by the Romanian journalists as soldiers gathering to fight for the same objective. In (10), for example, the left political parties are seen as ‘fighting’ together against a common enemy, the extreme right wave in Europa, such as in (11), some Romanian political leaders unite to ‘fight’ again against the National Anticorruption Directorate. In the latter example, even the actions they employ for that are regarded as a common war tactic, as they are ‘firing the same artillery’, just as the soldiers of the same armed forces must do in a battlefield.

#### 4.4. *Political actions are ambushes*

- (12) Euronews: The extreme right, **ambushed** in the presidential elections from Romania. / Ro: *Euronews: Extrema dreaptă, în ambuscadă în alegerile prezidențiale din România.* (news.ro)
- (13) The **ambush** of the SRU parliamentarians against the minister of Justice. Florin Iordache ran away. / Ro: *Ambuscada a parlamentarilor USR împotriva ministrului Justiției. Florin Iordache a dat bir cu fugitii – Video.* (actual24.ro)

When political parties go one against the other through different actions, be it law project proposals or the rejection of certain projects, these are considered ambushes, just like in a war, when one of the sides is being attacked, by surprise, from all sides. In (12), the extreme right is the one cornered and attacked after the presidential elections in Romania, just as in (13) the ambush comes from the members of a political party against a minister from an opposing group. In these examples, the authors of the articles associate a large group of people going against one or a few people to an ambush on the battlefield due to the impossibility of the target (the extreme right or Florin Iordache) to defend themselves against the actions.

#### 4.5. *Politics is a battle*

- (14) The political **battle** for the pandemic is happening on two fronts. Who wins and who loses? / Ro: *Bătălia politică pentru pandemie se dă pe două fronturi. Cine câștigă și cine pierde?* (europaliberaromania)
- (15) Surprising news from the **battle** front for money and freedom. / Ro: *Noutati surprinzătoare de pe frontul bataliei pentru bani si libertate.* (hotnews.ro)
- (16) Between whom and whom will be final **battle** for Cotroceni be held. The candidates who are the first to go out in the first round. / Ro: *Între cine se va da bătălia finală pentru Cotroceni. Candidații care ies din joc din primul tur.* (ziare.com)
- (17) The **battle** for Cotroceni. Ciolacu is in the first position, Simion and Ladconi are fighting for the second term of the presidential elections. / Ro: *Bătălia pentru Cotroceni. Ciolacu este pe primul loc, Simion și Lasconi se luptă pentru intrarea în turul II al prezidențialelor.* (adevarul.ro)

The examples in 14-17 are closely aligned with the ones in 10-11, where the politicians are seen as soldiers. In these four examples, however, the ‘battles’ have different purposes: the sympathy of the citizens (14), overthrowing the Ciolos government (15), and the presidential position (16, 17). In (14) and (15), these metaphors or the battle are accompanied by the metaphor of the ‘political life’ being a ‘frontline’, wherein the political parties must work very hard to keep their positions.

#### 4.6. *Accusations are artillery*

- (18) Marcel Bolos, under fire artillery in the Deputies Chamber. The elected ones started the meeting on the debate of the motion against him. / Ro: *Marcel Boloș, sub tirul acuzațiilor în Camera Deputaților. Aleșii au început ședința în care se dezbate moțiunea împotriva sa.* (romanalibera.ro)
- (19) Austria, under artillery fire from Euro parliamentarian Rares Bogdan. “It wants to embarrass us. We must fight till the end. / Ro: *Austria, sub tirul criticilor europarlamentarului Rareș Bogdan. „Vrea să se facă de râs. Trebuie să mergem până la capăt”.* (evz.ro)

As in every battlefield, soldiers use military equipment to take down the enemy. In politics, journalists see different political actions politicians rely on to go against their opponents as such type of military equipment. In (18), for example, the ‘fire artillery’ is a motion of censure some deputies were planning on presenting against one politician, meanwhile in (19) the ‘artillery fire’ is a statement, a criticism coming from one Romanian politician against Austria. Artillery fire normally has one direction and is quite fast, and the criticism and

motion of censure in these two examples also have each one target and are considered rapid answers to different political situations.

## 5. Conclusions. The trivialization of war

But why do Romanian journalists tend to use so many words associated with war?

Indeed, words are powerful. The way a journalist chooses to use words contours the whole story and interpretation of a related event. When using words associated with war to describe politics and politicians, the journalists cross the objectivity required in the media by adding their own thoughts and perspective on the significance of a fact. All these metaphors associated with war, especially in the headlines, exaggerate statements, actions and the features of politicians and have the purpose of making readers access the article, often realizing the content itself of the news is not as important or serious as the headlines were suggesting. The tension and the nervousness such strong terms as *war*, *bombardment*, *artillery fire*, *frontline*, *battle* create have an influence on the reader and make him/her access the article without even being, maybe, interested in politics, for example.

The transformations through which the media systems are going right now, with social media threatening to replace the mainstream media (newspapers, online media and TV) are pushing journalists to rely on such terms and create that tension among the readers, which eventually leads to a greater audience. However, this leads also to making actual wars and conflicts less interesting and serious than they really are, because the audiences get used to reading stories which, even though they have nothing to do with war, are impregnated with war related terms.

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